

BOOK REVIEW

Birdwing butterflies of the world (new and revised edition), by Bernard D'Abrera. Hill House Publishers, Melbourne, 2003, cost *ca* \$650.

This is the second edition of a Monograph of the birdwing butterflies (*Ornithoptera*, *Trogonoptera*, *Troides*), first published in 1975. Since then, D'Abrera has produced a stream of butterfly books that together seek to cover the butterfly fauna of the world. This is an almost impossible task for one man, even with the outstanding collections of The Natural History Museum, London (BMNH) at his fingertips, and his vision and hard work in doing so is to be applauded. The books are renowned for superb colour plates and rather minimalist text that many might regard as wildly eccentric.

Mr D'Abrera is unapologetic about his minimalist approach and, since he writes and finances his own publications, why should he be otherwise. Indeed, the question of text to accompany illustrations is deliberately kept to a minimum, since he believes (p. 303) that 'Readers of my work will by now have got used to the idea that I use as few words as possible, when the pictures I provide are good enough to convey the information needed.' Fair enough, so far as it goes, which is to say as far as description of adults or illustrated early stages is concerned although, in view of the massive literature available on this subject, one might wish for rather more padding sometimes, as will become clear. Eccentricity largely (but not wholly) concerns the question of creationist views, which D'Abrera promotes with some vehemence and, of course, he is entitled to his opinion.

In his most recent books, D'Abrera's personal attacks on colleagues have shown a depressing increase and, before going any further, I should declare that I am on the receiving end of such an attack myself in the book under review (pp 304-6). It is not my intention to challenge this attack, which would be offensive were it not so bizarre, since any interested reader with time on their hands can make their own objective assessment by reference to the literature (Tennent 1997). A personal interest thus declared, I confess to having been in turn both irritated and saddened by the gratuitous rudeness that runs through this book. It is possible to feel some sympathy, for D'Abrera clearly feels it necessary to respond to any criticism or comment with which he disagrees, in a most personal and destructive manner, to the extent where no perceived slight is too small to be vigorously attacked.

The book starts as it means to go on, with criticism of the publishers of the first edition (D'Abrera 1975) and reference to 'the fog of evolutionary pseudo-science' (p. ix) in the first paragraph of a preamble. This section goes on to give grudging acknowledgement to the fact that, since the first edition of his own book, 'there have been several attempts by various authors to monograph the birdwings.' With one exception (Matsuka 2001), D'Abrera thinks little of the work of others, condemning (p. ix) the 'prolix, unlovely, and curiously stilted' work of Haugum and Low (1978-1985), to a degree where the book is almost as much a critique of those authors and their work as it is a celebration of the birdwing butterflies. The work of Ohya (1983) is said to be 'beautifully produced, but taxonomically most peculiar' (p. x), whilst that of von Knötgen (1997) is 'a largely philatelic work of poor scientific or historical value' (p. x). Although Matsuka's superb birdwing book is said to be 'deliciously romantic and gorgeous', it is also said that 'as a serious systematic work ... it is not a success' (p. x). The preamble discusses the scope of the new edition and closes with acknowledgements.

An introductory section contains some historical information concerning the study of birdwing butterflies and quickly moves on to D'Abrera's favourite topics, the promotion of creationist ideals and corresponding vitriolic condemnation (as opposed to balanced dismissal) of any form of evolutionism. Here, the author discards any thought of evolutionary descent ('Evolution is an anti-science' [p. xvi]), but also dismisses 'specious theories of vast geological age' (p. xv), giving the recent Mount St. Helens eruption 'where hundreds of feet of horizontal stratification of soils and rock ... took place within the space of a few hours' as an example proving 'beyond the shadow of a doubt' that 'successive geological "strata" are in no way indicators of geological age' (p. xix). As already stated, anyone is entitled to an opinion, but the space devoted to this pet subject, however eloquently presented, is seriously out of place in a tome of this nature. Description of some 'philosopho-scientific definitions' is equally bizarre.

The main part of the book consists of some stunning habitat photographs and good quality colour plates depicting many of the birdwing butterflies taken from the collections of the BMNH which, although they could reasonably be considered comprehensive many years ago, lack most, if not all, recently described 'birdwing' taxa. This is for good reason; since *ca* 1973 CITES and other restrictions have made unlicensed collection of many birdwing butterflies unlawful. The Museum database shows that few *Ornithoptera* bequests were received between 1975 (the most notable was the collection of Andrew Low in 1985) and 1992, when a bequest from Alan Sharman was registered. No *Ornithoptera* specimens have been registered in the Museum since 1992. A search of The Zoological Record (1978 to mid-2003; available to D'Abrera on-line at the BMNH) listed 133 entries dealing specifically with *Ornithoptera*; 65 dealing with *Troides*, and 22 with *Trogonoptera*. Allowing for some duplication, there have been some 170 papers devoted to these genera published during the period. It is clear just from the titles that this combined literature introduced about 50 new names, ranging from a new subgenus, through many subspecies, to some infrasubspecific forms. Although many (but not all) of the new names are included in the book under review, D'Abrera appears to have made little or no effort to photograph new material for this second edition. For example (p. 121), in addition to nominotypical *O. arfakensis*, two races are accepted: *O. a. occidentalis* Morita & Takenaka, 1998, 'a remarkable race, strongly distinguished in the female' and *O. a. galatea* Sugiyama, 2000, 'a recent wonderful discovery of a small race.' Neither of these races are illustrated and, although both are annotated 'comb. nov.', there is no indication of the original combination. Of course, the reader could look at the original descriptions of these two names, which are accompanied by good quality colour illustrations (Morita and Takenaka 1998, Sugiyama 2000), but in a very expensive book purporting to be a monograph, one might reasonably expect a little more than the four and three lines respectively allocated to females of these taxa (not one word is devoted to the characteristics of either male!). The reader might in any event find some difficulty in finding the second reference, since the original source is not cited. Lack of any illustration of the distinctive *O. paradisea chrysanthemum* Kobayashi & Koiwaya, 1979, might be considered a significant omission.

It must surely have been relatively easy, in these modern days of instant communication and e-mail attachments, to obtain pictures of additional taxa for illustration, but D'Abrera has chosen not to do so; the reviewer contacted a Japanese colleague, author of one new taxon, via e-mail and found that he was not approached.

Another birdwing specialist, in the UK, who has several taxa not represented in the BMNH, told the reviewer that he would have been delighted to lend specimens for inclusion in this book, had he been asked. It can hardly be claimed that exclusion of new taxa or relevant data is due to a lack of available space, since the blank spaces in this book would easily accommodate all taxa not illustrated without any additional printing costs (e.g. less than half the available space is utilised on pp 12/3, 74/5, 138/9, 278/9, 298/9; no more than one third of pp 240/1 is used, and text on many other pages is minimal). One might expect the various works on birdwings by Parsons (1992a-b, 1996a-c, 1998 *etc.*) to have been drawn upon, or even the fascinating details of the discovery of the first female and the first male of *O. victoriae* by MacGillivray and Woodford respectively (Tennent 1997, 2002) to have received more than a passing mention. Towards the end of the volume (p. 300) is a list of 12 taxa, described by a number of different authors between 1979 and 1998, which D'Abrera dismisses without a word of explanation. One suspects he has not seen any of them.

It is interesting that D'Abrera now appears to acknowledge a possibility, long accepted as fact by most authors, that '*allotiei*' is a natural hybrid between *O. victoriae* and *O. priamus*. He states that his butterfly collection has been sold since the first edition of this book was published (specimens in the first edition noted as being from his collection 'have all long since been disbursed around the world' [p. x]). A male *allotiei* illustrated on p. 36 (it has a whole page to itself), which 'awaits deposit in a suitable museum' (p. 32), is therefore something of an enigma. This same specimen was offered to at least two butterfly collectors in France and Australia for sums between £10,000 and £20,000 in 1997; the fact that the BMNH, which has provided D'Abrera with his livelihood for more than a quarter of a century, is not considered a 'suitable' depository for this specimen, seems very strange indeed. Perhaps the fact that it clearly has considerable commercial value is a factor.

One new taxon, *Ornithoptera priamus wituensis*, is described (p. 68) from the Witu islands. The description of *wituensis* hinges on some minor features of colour, size and maculation, the author having apparently forgotten his own portentous claim earlier in the book (p. xv) that 'unlike Jordan and others, I do not rely on spotting or markings in general as a guide to differentiating between the various forms. One of the first requirements in attempting to understand these butterflies is the necessity to really grasp the reality of the immense variability of these maculations among individuals of any given population.' No opinion is offered here as to the validity of *wituensis*, but this does illustrate a certain inconsistency in approach. Comparison might be made with *O. p. miokensis*, which D'Abrera treats (p. 74) as '*O. priamus* f. loc. *miokensis*' and of which he declares 'Let me be quite clear, *miokensis* is a natural hybrid between eastward-flying *bornemannii* and westward-flying *urvillianus*, both meeting naturally on Mioko, and there's an end of it.' No science here then!

D'Abrera illustrates three males (one underside) of *wituensis*, including the holotype (but see below), which 'illustrate the variability of range [presumably the range of variation] to be observed amongst the ten males in the [BMNH].' One wonders why, in view of the stated wide range of variation, D'Abrera chose not to illustrate the full range, since there is room on the two pages concerned on which to place several further specimens life sized; in fact, it would have been possible to include almost the whole series of both sexes life sized if they had been 'halved'! He can have no aversion to including so many specimens of the same taxon, for he illustrates, over 11 pages, 14 males of *O. p. urvillianus*, many of which appear almost identical, including

two specimens photographed in life, one of which is, with the exception of the tip of one antenna, wholly out of focus.

Examination of type material (10 ♂♂, 10 ♀♀) of *wituensis* in the BMNH identified some extremely sloppy work. One male specimen bears a label written in red biro, marked '*wituensis* (BD'A) m/s holotype', and is identified in the BMNH database (specimen # 134356) as the holotype. No other specimen carries an individual label: a similar hand-written drawer label, marked '*wituensis* BD'A 1994 m/s', is placed below the remainder of the series. Unfortunately, the specimen apparently labelled by D'Abrera some 10 years ago as the holotype, is not the specimen identified as the holotype (BMNH database # 134355, lacking one antenna since it was photographed) in his book. Whilst we all have occasional lapses, D'Abrera obviously considers placing type labels on taxa he has described as unnecessary. Not for the first time (*cf* Tennent 2001, 2004), the reviewer has now placed suitable individual labels on the specimens in order to avoid future confusion. For the record, D'Abrera correctly gives data from the holotype as 'Witu (French I.), June-August, 1925, coll. A. F. Eichhorn', and lists (p. 68) 9 male and 10 female paratypes 'all with data as above'. This is not true: 7 males (including the holotype) and 6 females, bear typed labels with the data 'Witu = French Is. June-August 25 (A. F. Eichhorn)'; 2 males and 3 females are labelled 'Witu = French Is. June 1925 (A. F. Eichhorn)'; 1 female has a hand-written label marked only 'French Insel', and the remaining male bears an indecipherable hand-written label which reads something like 'Teena Sol'.

Deslisle (2001) raised a new subgenus (*Zeunera*) for *Ornithoptera alexandrae*; again no opinion is offered here as to the validity of that action, but one might expect to see a passing mention, if not a detailed discussion, in a monograph of the group published two years later. On p. x, D'Abrera states 'the work by Sumiyoshi (1989) ... is limited by its narrow treatment of the *Ornithoptera* only, ignoring the other two genera that make up the birdwings. Perhaps the author is planning to treat these genera in due course.' Aside from the faintly ludicrous suggestion that Sumiyoshi's work was incomplete because he chose not to incorporate additional genera (the term birdwings has no taxonomic relevance) in his *Ornithoptera* work, something akin to criticising Carpenter (1953) for not including the 'other genera' that make up the 'milkweeds' in his treatment of *Euploea*, the late Mr Sumiyoshi did in fact deal with *Troides* and *Trogonoptera*, published in the year before his death 10 years ago (Sumiyoshi 1994). These few examples illustrate a remarkable lack of research in the production of this volume; whether due to arrogance or incompetence (or a combination of both) is not entirely clear.

The book is an extraordinary exercise in self-indulgence, often blinkered and largely pompous. For example, D'Abrera's opinion of his own book on butterflies of the Australian Region (D'Abrera 1971), which he believes (p. 230) was 'arguably the most luxuriously and comprehensively produced regional work on butterflies following the 2nd World War', was a view not shared by a respected Australian reviewer who found that 'the text and several plate captions regrettably contain numerous errors and misprints ... introduction abounds in inexcusable inaccuracies and half truths ... the glossary wrongly or misleadingly defines a number of terms ... within the main text there are many more errors and omissions, some of which are due to the failure of the author to study the butterfly literature' (Moulds 1972). More than 30 years later, similar errors, omissions and bizarre comments abound in the book under review.

Unwittingly, the curious (and sadly often rather ridiculous) tone of this book probably does the evolutionist cause considerable favour (not that it needs help). However, the book goes a long way beyond eccentricity and, whilst it might be customary to ignore D'Abrera's rambling and highly offensive outbursts, he must expect to be challenged occasionally. Eccentricity is a wonderful thing, but it is no longer amusing when it becomes venomous and destructive; he should also understand that whilst dead victims are easy prey, live ones might occasionally find the time and have the inclination to bite back. His attacks on the late Jan Haugum and the late Ray Straatman are unworthy and cowardly; in particular, Jan Haugum was a generous man with a very well developed sense of humour. His work was well researched and his recent passing is a loss to entomology. One wonders how history will view D'Abrera.

Perfection is an elusive goal and it is just not possible to write a book without making mistakes, which is why the review process, which hopefully reduces mistakes to a minimum, is so important. Of course anyone who writes, publishes and markets their own books is entitled to write whatever they want, but it might be considered to be to any author's advantage to arrange some external review, a process which not only reduces errors but (in this case) might provide a steadying or cautionary influence on some of the more offensive criticisms of others. In the opinion of the reviewer, the poor standard of this work would be unlikely to attract the interest of any serious publisher. D'Abrera gives his address (p. xi) as c/o the BMNH, London, although he has actually never had any formal connection with the Entomology Department of the Museum beyond that of a long-term visitor. One wonders whether, in a climate in which science is increasingly fighting a rearguard action against fundamentalist philosophies, that institution should be concerned at being associated, however informally, with contentious religious issues presented in such an intolerant manner or, for that matter, with such gratuitous rudeness. That this book is a work of art is undisputed; but claim for its acceptance as a work of science is dubious. If D'Abrera had been moved to put the same effort into researching butterflies as he has expended on subjective, mean-spirited and rude criticisms of people with whose views he finds fault, this superficial work would have been immeasurably enhanced. The long gestation period leading to publication of a book allows ample opportunity for modification and fine-tuning; D'Abrera presumably therefore actively seeks to offend.

This second edition adds little or nothing of interest to our knowledge of these splendid butterflies. In the opinion of the reviewer, the book has no place on the shelf of any serious lepidopterist, professional or amateur. Its very high price makes it impractical as a coffee table attraction and it is difficult to see any use for it beyond mere curiosity. D'Abrera clearly loves the butterflies he has chosen to deal with and there is no doubt he has made a unique contribution to entomology over the years, stimulating much interest and research. Conservation issues raised in this (and other) books by the same author will rightly find favour in all quarters; indeed adoption of these principles would undoubtedly make the world in general a better place. It is equally true, in the opinion of the reviewer, that the entomological world would be a *nicer* place without the pompous poison that flows so freely from the D'Abrera pen.

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